

Three Letters from Teddy

Teddy's letter came today. Now that I've read it I will put in my cedar chest with all the other things that are important in my life.

"I wanted you to be the first to know." I smiled as I read the words he had written and my heart swelled with a pride that I had no right to feel. I had not seen Teddy Stallard since he was a student in my fifth grade class, 15 years ago. It was early in my career, and I had only been teaching for 2 years.

From the first day he stepped into my classroom I disliked Teddy. Teachers (although everyone knows differently) are not supposed to have favorites in a class, but most especially, they are not to show dislike for a child, any child.

Nevertheless, every year there are one or two children that one cannot help but be attached to, for teachers are human, and it is human nature to like bright, pretty, intelligent people whether they are 10 years old or 25. And sometimes, not too often fortunately, there will be one or two students to whom the teacher just can't seem to relate.

I had thought myself quite capable of handling my personal feelings along that line until Teddy walked into my life. There wasn't a child I particularly liked that year, but Teddy was most assuredly one I disliked.

He was dirty, not just occasionally, but all the time. His hair hung low over his ears, and he actually had to hold it out of his eyes as he wrote in class. (And this was before it was fashionable to do so!) Too, he had peculiar odor about him which I could not identify.

His physical faults were many, and his intellect left a lot to be desired also. By the end of the first week I knew he was hopelessly behind the others. Not only was he behind, he was just plain slow! I began to withdraw from him immediately.

Any teacher will tell you that it's more of a pleasure to teach a bright child. It is definitely more rewarding for one's ego. But any teacher worth their credentials can channel work to the bright child, keeping him challenged and learning, while she puts a major effort on the slower ones. Any teacher can do this. Most teachers can do it, but I didn't, not that year.

In fact, I concentrated on my best students and let the others follow as best they could. Ashamed I am to admit it, I took perverse pleasure in using my red pen; and each time I came to Teddy's papers, the cross marks (and there were many) were always a little larger and redder than necessary.

"Poor work!" I would write with a flourish.

While I did not actually ridicule the boy, my attitude was obviously quite apparent to the class, for he quickly became the outcast – the unlovable and the unloved.

He knew I didn't like him, but he didn't know why. Nor did I know – then or now –

why I felt such an intense dislike for him. All I know is that he was a little boy no one cared about, and I made no effort on his behalf.

The days rolled by. We made it through the Fall Festival and the Thanksgiving Holidays, and I continued marking happily with my red pen.

As the Christmas holidays approached, I knew that Teddy would never catch up in time to be promoted to the sixth grade level. He would be a repeater.

To justify myself, I went to his cumulative folder from time to time. He had very low grades for the first four years, but not grade failure. How he had made it to me I don't know. I closed my mind to the personal remarks.

First grade: Teddy shows promising work and attitude but has poor home situation.

Second Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother terminally ill. He receives little help from home.

Third Grade: Teddy is a pleasant boy. Helpful, but too serious. Slow learner. Mother passed away end of year.

Fourth Grade: Very slow, but well behaved. Father shows no interest.

Well, they passed him four times, but he will certainly repeat fifth grade! Do him good, I said to myself.

And then, the last day before the holiday arrived. Our little tree on the reading table sported paper and popcorn chains. Many gifts were heaped underneath, waiting for the big moment.

Teachers always get several gifts at Christmas, but mine that year seemed bigger and more elaborate than ever. There was not a student who had not brought me one. Each unwrapping brought squeals of delight, and the proud giver would receive an effusive thank you.

His gift wasn't the last one I picked up; in fact it was in the middle of the pile. Its wrapping was a brown paper bag, and he had colored Christmas trees and red bells all over it. It was stuck together with masking tape.

"For Miss Thompson – From Teddy" it read.

The group was completely silent, and for the first time I felt conspicuous, embarrassed because they all stood watching me unwrap that gift.

As I removed the last bit of masking tape, two items fell to my desk; a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a small bottle of dime store cologne half empty.

I could hear snickers and whispers, and I wasn't sure I could look at Teddy.

"Isn't this lovely?" I asked, placing the bracelet on my wrist. "Teddy will you help me fasten it?"

He smiled shyly as he fixed the clasp, and I held up my wrist for all of them to admire.

There were a few hesitant oohs and ahhs, but as I dabbed the cologne behind my ears, all the little girls lined up for a dab behind their ears.

I continued to open gifts until I reached the bottom of the pile. We ate our refreshments, and the bell rang.

The children filed out with shouts of "See you next year!" and "Merry Christmas" but Teddy waited at his desk.

When they had all left he walked toward me, clutching his gift and books to his chest.

"You smell like my Mom", he said softly. "Her bracelet looks real pretty on you to. I'm glad you liked it."

He left quickly. I locked the door, sat down in my desk and wept, resolving to make up to Teddy what I deliberately deprived him of – a teacher who cared.

I stayed every afternoon with Teddy from the end of Christmas Holidays until the last day of school. Sometimes we worked together. Sometimes he worked alone while I drew up lesson plans or marked papers. Slowly but surely he caught up with the rest of the class. Gradually there was a definite curve in his grades.

He did not have to repeat fifth grade. In fact, his final averages were among some of the highest in the class, and, although I knew he would be moving out of state when school was out, I was not worried for him. Teddy had reached a level that would stand him in a good stead the following year, no matter where he went. He had enjoyed a measure of success, and as we were taught in our teacher training courses, "Success builds success."

I did not hear from Teddy until seven years later, when his first letter appeared in my mailbox.

Dear Miss Thompson,

I just wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class next month.

Very truly yours,

Teddy Stallard

I sent him a card of congratulations and a small package, a pen and pencil gift set. I wondered what he would do after graduation.

Four years later, Teddy's second letter came.

Dear Miss Thompson,

I wanted you to be the first to know. I was just informed that I'll be graduating first in my class. The university has not been easy but I liked it.

Very truly yours,
Teddy Stallard

I sent him a good pair of sterling silver monogrammed cufflinks and a card, so proud of him I could almost burst.

And now today – Teddy's third letter!

Dear Miss Thompson,
I just wanted you to be the first to know. As of today I am Theodore J. Stallard, M.D. How about that!!?? I am going to be married in July, the 27th, to be exact. I wanted to ask if you could come and sit where Mom would sit if she were here. I'll have no family there as Dad died last year.

Very truly yours,
Teddy Stallard

I'm not sure what kind of a gift one sends to a doctor on completion of medical school and state boards. Maybe I'll just wait and take a wedding gift, but my note can't wait.

Dear Ted,
Congratulations! You made it, and you did it yourself!
In spite of those like me and not because of us, this day has come for you.
God bless you. I'll be at the Wedding with bells on!

Elizabeth Silance Balard